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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that counselor warmth, empathy, and genuineness facilitate client growth. One explanation suggests that these qualities facilitate client discharge of emotion. Another explanation emphasizes the sense of understanding and sharing with the counselor. The current study has Ss self-disclose on a mild personal problem to a student counselor, silently meditate alone, or verbally discharge alone into a tape recorder. Self-report measures were taken of the usefulness of the counseling sessions. Ss also filled out an open-ended questionnaire. Interpersonal counseling Ss rated the degree to which understanding-sharing or discharge was more important. Interpersonal counseling was significantly more useful to Ss on several measures than discharge into a tape recorder. Interpersonal Ss wrote fewer words on the open-ended questionnaire, suggested they had less need to communicate than tape Ss. Understanding-sharing was rated as more important by interpersonal Ss than discharge. It also correlated more with Ss' perceptions of the usefulness of counseling. Overall results support understanding-sharing as more important than discharge. (Author)

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Understanding-Sharing Versus Discharge in Interpersonal Counseling

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Running head: Understanding-Sharing

Understanding-Sharing Versus Discharge In Interpersonal Counseling

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of interpersonal counseling under certain conditions. These are that the counselor be high in warmth, empathy, and genuineness (Truax & Mitchell, 1971).

How a warm, empathic, and genuine relationship facilitates personal change is unknown. Re-evaluation counseling (Jackins, 1965, Pheterson, 1974) has suggested that a good relationship facilitates discharge of stored emotion. Change occurs as a result of the release and dissipation of this stored affect.

In contrast, from a client-centered perspective we believe that it is the interpersonal communication nature of a relationship that is growth-producing. More specifically, we suspect that even the experience of feeling an emotion dissipate is contingent on its being shared with and understood by another. Understanding-sharing is seen as an interpersonal event composed both of the sense of having been understood, and having shared oneself with another. We believe that the sense of understanding and sharing present between counselor and client causes change, whether emotion is discharged or not.

One way to picture the difference between these two viewpoints is that a communication explanation would predict client growth even if the client said (expressed) little, and the therapist did all the talking, as sometimes occurred in the Wisconsin schizophrenia project (Rogers, 1967). For discharge theory, growth without expression would be impossible. Another way to put the difference is to ask whether the client's feeling of relief

immediately follows his expressions of af affect (discharge), or whether it follows the counselor's response to that expression.

The current study hypothesized that the feeling of being understood in a sharing, accepting way by a listener was more important than emotional discharge in interpersonal counseling. The hypothesis was tested as part of an exploration of the usefulness of a "drop-in" clinic for mild one-shot personal problems. Student Ss participated for class credit. They were asked to discuss a mild personal concern. They were assigned to one of three "counseling" treatments. One group of students discussed their problem with a student paraprofessional counselor. A second group silently meditated alone. A third group verbally "discharged" their feelings alone into a tape recorder. All Ss filled out an overall "outcome" questionnaire, and an open-ended questionnaire. Ss in the interpersonal counseling condition also filled out an "Interpersonal" questionnaire. On this, Ss rated the warmth, empathy, and genuineness of their counselor. They also rated the degree of benefit from understanding-sharing, discharge, or feedback from the counselor. Feedback from the counselor was included as a third possible benefit of interpersonal counseling, though we were less interested in this. Finally they rated which of understanding-sharing, feedback, or discharge was most valuable to them.

The hypothesis was explored in two ways. The most important data came from an examination of what Ss in the interpersonal counseling condition said about their experience. We predicted that these Ss would perceive understanding and sharing with a counselor as more useful than emotional discharge. We also predicted that their ratings of the degree

of benefit to them from understanding and sharing would correlate more with various items on the outcome questionnaire, which consisted of 14 statements of positive or negative change from the counseling experience.

The above correlations and subject perceptions constituted the major evidence to be used in evaluating the hypothesis. In addition, comparisons between interpersonal counseling, silent meditation, and tape discharge were made as a further test of the hypothesis.

Specific hypotheses were that the order of Ss' ratings of positive outcome would be interpersonal, silent, tape discharge. Discharge theory could argue there would be more discharge in interpersonal counseling than talking to a tape recorder, but the tape discharge should still be more useful than silent meditation. The interpersonal explanation predicts that tape would be the least useful, because Ss engage in a communication-like activity, but don't communicate. For this reason, and based on preliminary research, we also predicted that tape Ss would feel frustrated from not having communicated and write more words on an open-ended questionnaire, then interpersonal Ss, who did communicate.

Method

Subjects

Sixty-six undergraduate male and female psychology students participated to fulfill experiment participation requirements in psychology classes.

Procedure

Announcements were made to psychology classes with experimental participation requirements that we were investigating the feasibility of a "psychological flu clinic" - a place to deal with mild transitory personal

problems. Illustrations, such as being angry at a professor, were given.

S was met at the experimental setting by an experimenter (E). E asked S to think of a mild personal problem. S was randomly assigned to the interpersonal, silent, or tape conditions. Interpersonal Ss were told that the purpose of the listener was to share the Ss' feelings and thoughts, and to give them an opportunity to express their feelings and get them off their chest. Silent Ss were told that silent thinking without interruption was sometimes helpful. Tape Ss were told that "expressing your feelings is sometimes helpful." They were also told that no-one would listen to their tape, but they themselves could at the end of the experiment. Afterwards their tape would be erased. Interpersonal Ss were taken to another room and introduced to a student counselor. All counselors had undergone 6 weeks of a paraprofessional training program, previously shown to raise levels of interpersonal functioning (Bohart, Hewitt, Heilmann, & Threlkeld, 1976). Both silent and tape Ss were placed alone in a room. Silent Ss were instructed to think about their problem. Tape Ss were given a cassette tape recorder and told to talk their feelings into it.

All Ss returned to the E when done. Interpersonal Ss typically talked for 20-30 minutes. Tape and silent Ss were through in about 7-10 minutes. Ss then filled out several self-report measures.

Measures

Outcome. An overall outcome questionnaire was constructed. This consisted of three "general" items: "I feel that this session was helpful to me," "If a center like this were opened, I would drop in occasionally to deal with my short-term problems and feelings," and "I enjoyed participating

in this experiment." There were eleven additional items concerning more specific outcomes. Items were rated on a "1-7" scale, from "completely disagree" to "completely agree."

Open-ended. This consisted of four general questions concerning Ss' reactions to the "flu clinic" idea, their specific "treatment" and their typical coping styles for personal problems.

Interpersonal. This was given only to Ss who received interpersonal counseling. It consisted of three statements rating the counselor's warmth, empathy, and genuineness. In addition, Ss rated "I really got some things off my chest" (off-chest), "Receiving feedback from someone else helped me zero in on my feelings and concerns" (feedback), "Having someone share and understand my feelings was of benefit to me" (understanding-sharing), "The main benefit to me was that the listener facilitated my discharging my emotions and getting them off my chest" (discharge). These items were rated on a "1-7" scale, from "completely disagree" to "completely agree."

Finally, Ss rated which of "understanding-sharing," "discharge," or "feedback" was the most important benefit of having a listener.

Results

Interpersonal Questionnaire

Of the twenty-two Ss, 12 chose understanding-sharing as the main benefit of having a counselor. Five Ss chose discharge and five chose counselor feedback. By chance, any S choosing each of the three choices was $p = 1/3$. Thus, p of choosing understanding-sharing was 1/3; and p of not choosing understanding-sharing (choosing either discharge or feedback) was 2/3. Using the binomial expansion, the odds of at least 12 or 22 Ss choosing understanding-sharing was $p = .03$. Therefore, Ss chose understanding-sharing

significantly more often than either of the other two choices. In addition, lumping understanding-sharing and feedback together, 17 of 22 Ss chose an "interpersonal" reason as the main benefit of having a counselor.

Table 1 gives Ss' mean ratings of counselor warmth, empathy, genuineness, degree to which Ss got things of their chest, benefit to Ss of understanding-sharing, benefit of receiving feedback, and whether the main thing for them had been discharge. Correlations between these items are also given.

Insert Table 1 about here

Counselors were rated high in warmth, empathy, and genuineness. Understanding-sharing correlated significantly with counselor warmth, empathy, and genuineness. Neither off-chest, nor discharge did. The correlation between warmth and understanding-sharing was significantly higher than the correlation between warmth and off-chest (t = 3.24, p < .01, df = 20), and approached being significantly higher than that between warmth and discharge (t = 2.02, p <.10, df=20). The differences on empathy and genuineness were not significant. Interestingly, warmth was the only one of warmth, empathy, and genuineness to correlate significantly with the major outcome question: "The session was helpful to me" (r = 0.58, p <.005).

Also of note are the significant correlations between feedback and both off-chest and understanding-sharing. In addition, the two "discharge" items, off-chest and discharge, did not correlate significantly.

Correlations of Interpersonal and Outcome Questionnaires

Table 2 presents correlations between understanding-sharing, off-chest, discharge, and feedback from the interpersonal questionnaire with 11 of the

14 items on the overall questionnaire. No significant correlations were found on the three items not listed.

Insert Table 2 about here

It can be seen that understanding-sharing correlated significantly with five positive outcome items of the counseling session, and approached correlating significantly with two. Off-chest correlated significantly with three, and approached significance with a negative outcome item ("I feel tightness inside"). Discharge correlated significantly with two items, and approached significance on four.

To test significance of difference between correlations of understanding-sharing with the 11 outcome items, and the correlations of these items with off-chest and discharge, multiple regression was used (Kerlinger & Pedhazer, 1973).

Understanding-sharing, and one of discharge or off-chest were used as pairs of items to predict to each of the 11 outcome items. By entering items in pairs, the independent increase in prediction gained from the second item entered could be assessed. Thus one set of regressions was done entering off-chest first and understanding-sharing second, another set entering understanding-sharing first and off-chest second, and likewise for understanding-sharing and discharge.

Results are given in in table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

To interpret this table, an example will be used. Understanding-sharing correlates .66 with "I feel enhanced," while off-chest correlates only .17. Reference to table 3 shows that the increase in prediction to "I feel enhanced" gained by using understanding-sharing over off-chest is significant (F = 13.65, df = 1,20, $P < .01$). Thus understanding-sharing is a significantly better predictor of feeling enhanced than off-chest.

On "I feel calm," both items account for a significantly greater increase in prediction when entered into the regression equation second. However the F's are different. This is because the independent increase in prediction due to each item is different. It can also be seen that the increase in prediction from the second item is in the opposite direction from the first item (one correlation is negative, one is positive).

Understanding-sharing is a significantly better predictor of positive outcome than off-chest on four items, and approached significance on one. Off-chest was significantly better on two. Understanding was better than discharge on three items, and approached being better on four. Discharge was better on one, and significantly worse on one.

Comparison of Interpersonal, Tape, and Silent Meditation

Table 4 gives means and results of ANOVA's on the three general outcome questions. In addition, the average number of words written on the open-ended questionnaire are given. Individual comparisons were done using "t"

Insert Table 4 about here

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with a pooled variance estimate. This is more conservative than the normal

"t" test for planned comparisons (Winer, 1971). All df were equal to 63. The order predicted on all four variables was interpersonal, silent, tape. This was found on every variable except "use the clinic," where the order was silent, interpersonal, tape. On "session was helpful," interpersonal differed from combined silent and tape ($t = 2.33$, $p = .02$), and from tape ($t = 2.58$, $p = .01$). Interpersonal and silent did not differ significantly ($t = 1.46$, $p = .15$). On "enjoyed the experiment," interpersonal differed from combined tape and silent ($t = 2.82$, $p = .08$). No differences between tape and silent approached significance.

On the number of words written on the open-ended questionnaire, the overall F approached significance. A planned comparison between interpersonal and tape was significant ($t = 2.05$, $p < .05$).

Most importantly, discharge theory should predict greater positive outcome for the tape condition than the silent condition. On all the above outcomes this was not found.

Discussion

Results converge to support the importance of interpersonal communication and sharing in interpersonal counseling. The majority of Ss chose understanding and sharing over either discharge or counselor feedback as the reason for counseling's effectiveness. In addition, ratings of the benefit of understanding-sharing correlated either significantly, or approached significant correlating with more items on the outcome of counseling. Understanding-sharing was a significantly better predictor on more outcome items than either of the discharge items. Finally, understanding-sharing correlated significantly with counselor warmth, empathy, and

genuineness, while ratings of discharge did not. In addition, Ss interpersonally counseled felt the session was helpful to them more than Ss who talked to a tape recorder. They also enjoyed the experiment more. Finally, though the overall "F" only approached significance, interpersonally counseled Ss wrote significantly fewer words on an open-ended questionnaire than tape Ss. This suggested they may have "communicated" more than tape Ss.

A third condition, silent mediation, was second to interpersonal on the helpfulness of the session ($p < .15$) and on enjoyment of the experiment ($p = < .08$), though neither result was significant. On possible use of the "drop-in" clinic, silent was ranked slightly higher than interpersonal, though the means were nearly identical. On the number of words written on the open-ended questionnaire, silent again ranked second to interpersonal. This is contrary to a "discharge" hypothesis. Discharge theory should imply that expression (of stored contents) is necessary for personal change. Silent should have been the least effective. On the other hand, Gendlin (1970), among others, has argued that an interpersonal element is necessary for personal problem resolution to occur. Though, from our data, we would guess that interpersonal was more effective than silent, this is based on slim evidence. It may be that the provision of an opportunity for silent meditation is facilitative. This would not be incompatible with meditative approaches.

In sum, the data support understanding-sharing as more important than emotional discharge. However, the data present some problems. Understanding-sharing was rated as the most beneficial reason for having a counselor by the

majority of Ss, and correlated more positively with feeling enhanced, calm, and less tight than discharge. Getting one's feelings off-chest, however, was more highly related to the likelihood of Ss using a drop-in clinic, and to having a sharper sense of their feelings. Thinking discharge was the main benefit of counseling related more highly to Ss planning a change in their actions. Tentatively, understanding-sharing may lead to stress reduction while individuals who focus on getting feelings off their chest may feel more of a need for a place to do it, may focus on their feelings more, and may have a sharper sense of them. Finally, once they have discharged, they may feel a greater need to change their actions.

Methodological problems limit the findings. First, the off-chest and discharge items did not correlate. This may be due to the way they were phrased. One might agree that "I got some things off my chest," without feeling that "the main thing for me was discharge." Secondly, Ss were not called upon to discriminate between discharge, understanding-sharing, and counselor feedback until the last questionnaire item. Ss may feel they get things off their chest when they feel understanding and sharing. Or they may feel that counselor feedback causes understanding-sharing or getting things off one's chest. Significant or nearly significant correlations between these three mechanisms suggest Ss may not have discriminated between them until asked to choose between them on the last questionnaire item.

The final methodological problem concerns the analogue nature of the research. Sessions were short. Ss talked of mild personal problems. All measures were self report. At the same time we were surprised at the high

frequency of real personal problems presented. An extension of this research might include video-taping counseling sessions, and the use of other outcome criteria, to eliminate these problems.

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Table 1. Means and correlations between interpersonally-counseled subjects' ratings of counselor warmth, empathy, and genuineness; and degree to which subjects got things off their chest, felt counselor feedback was valuable, felt understanding and sharing with the counselor was of benefit, and felt the main benefit to them was discharge.

	X	W	E	G	O-C	F	U-S
Warmth (W)	6.68	1.00					
Empathy (E)	6.00	0.10	1.00				
Genuineness (G)	6.05	0.10	0.86^{xxx}	1.00			
Off-chest (O-C)	5.14	-0.14	0.22	0.31	1.00		
Feedback (F)	5.05	0.25	0.41^{x}	0.50^{xxx}	1.00		
Understanding-Sharing (U-S)	5.86	0.52^{xx}	0.50^{xx}	0.48^{xx}	0.36^{x}	0.65^{xxx}	1.00
Discharge	4.77	0.02	0.16	0.16	0.28	0.36^{x}	0.24

Note: Items were rated on a scale from "1" (completely disagree) to "7" (completely agree).

xxx $p < .01$

xx $p < .01$

x $p < .10$

Table 2. Correlations of subjects ratings of four mechanisms of change in interpersonal counseling with their ratings of 11 outcome items.

Outcome items	Off-chest	Understanding-Sharing	Discharge	Feedback
"Session was helpful"	.32	.49^{xx}	.03	.40^{x}
"I have a sharper sense of my feelings"	.55^{xxx}	.413^{x}	.23	.38^{x}
"My concerns are understandable"	.45^{xx}	.46^{xx}	.415^{xx}	.28
"I feel tightness inside"	.36^{x}	-.30	.35	.14
"I feel calm"	-.30	.44^{xx}	-.18	.08
"I have a better perspective"	.27	.43^{xx}	.11	.28
"I got in touch with deep feelings"	.31	.35	.40^{x}	.34
"I'm planning a change in actions"	.31	.19	.62^{xxx}	.37^{x}
"I feel enhanced"	.17	.66^{xxx}	.07	.57^{xxx}
"I would use the clinic"	.65^{xxx}	.32	.37^{x}	.40^{x}
"I enjoyed the experiment"	-.10	.37^{x}	.13	.10

NOTE: $^{xxx}p < .01$; $^{xx}p < .05$; $^{x}p < .10$

Table 3. F's for independent increase in prediction to outcome items for one mechanism of counseling effectiveness over another.

Outcome items	Understanding over Off-chest	Off-chest over Understanding	Understanding over Discharge	Discharge over Understanding
"Session was helpful"	4.17^{x}		6.27^{xx}	
"I have a sharper sense of my feelings"		5.42^{xx}	3.12^{x}	
"My concerns are understandable"			3.79^{x}	
"I feel tightness inside"	5.87^{xx}	7.03^{xx}	4.01^{x}	4.88^{xx}
"I feel calm"	11.83^{xx}	8.34^{xxx}	6.59^{xx}	
"I have a better perspective"	3.02^{x}		3.98^{x}	
"I feel enhanced"	13.65^{xxx}		14.50^{xxx}	10.75^{xxx}
"I would use the clinic"		11.31^{xxx}		
"I enjoyed the experiment"	4.50^{xx}			

Note: See text for further explanation.

$^{xxx}p < .01$

$^{xx}p < .05$

$^{x}p < .10$

Table 4. Mean ratings of outcome for interpersonally counseled subjects, silent meditation subjects, and subjects who verbally discharged into a tape recorder, on three items. Mean number of words written on an open-ended questionnaire by each group are also presented, along with results of ANOVA's on all four variables.

		Interpersonal	Silent	Tape	$F(2,63)$
"The session was helpful to me:	$\bar{X}$	5.77[a]	5.18	4.73[a]	3.36
	sd	1.11	1.26	1.51	$p=.04$
"I would use the clinic"	$\bar{X}$	4.86	4.95	3.86	n.s.
	sd	1.86	1.91	2.27	
"I enjoyed the experiment"	$\bar{X}$	6.18[ac]	5.41[c]	4.86[a]	4.78
	sd	0.51	1.30	2.03	$p=.01$
Number of words written on open-ended question-naire.	$\bar{X}$	86.72[b]	100.50	124.04[b]	2.56
	sd	55.58	49.24	75.09	$p<.10$

Note: Scale was from "1" (completely disagree) to "7" (completely agree)

Items with common superscripts differ as follows:

[a] $p < .01$

[b] $p < .05$

[c] $p < .10$

Footnotes

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